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► **OBSERVE AND LEARN**

Meeting (potential) customers in person and talking to customers in focus groups belong to the most effective techniques for creating new product ideas. A previously mentioned recent American study concerning ideation techniques confirms this! It is of the utmost importance to know how existing products or services in the domain of your innovation mission are being used or which role they play in a specific production process in B2B markets.

The proper preparation will help you to find customer frictions. There are three important questions to answer:

1. Who are the relevant customers?
2. How do we discover what their concerns are?
3. How do we describe the customer friction?

HOW TO FIND

1. Identifying relevant customer groups

In both B2C and B2B markets, you need to ask yourself the question: Who is involved in the decision making process in the relevant domain for this product/service category? Identify different roles, like:

1. The Initiator - who starts the purchasing process?
2. The Influencer - who tries to convince others they need the product?
3. The Decider - who makes the final decision?
4. The Buyer - who is going to pay the bill?
5. The User - who ends up using your product or service?

Another way to identify customers is based on their usage:

1. Non-users.
2. Light-users.
3. Average-users.
4. Heavy-users.
4. Ex-users.

Select the customer groups based on roles or usage most relevant to you. Identify matching consumers or professional customers, who you can contact and visit personally or invite to join a focus group discussion.

CUSTOMER FRICTIONS?

2. Discovering what their concerns are

Stepping into the lives of consumers or professional customers is THE way to discover issues people are concerned with. Person-to-person interviews work quite well as they are conducive to building mutual trust and make the participants more inclined to tell you what bothers them in the product/service domain you'd like to discuss with them. Focus groups are also a good option if the subject is not too sensitive. The script used to discover customer frictions is quite similar for personal interviews and focus groups:

- Tell me about yourself.
- Tell me about the relevancy for you of products/services in this domain. Why?
- Tell me about your buying experience. Why?
- Tell me about the usage of these products/services. Why?
- On buying/using: What are you struggling with? Which problems do you encounter? Why?
- What would be your ultimate dream in this domain? Why?

As you noticed, the key question is: WHY?

3. Describing the customer's friction

In recognizing struggles, problems of customers, carefully listen to what they say. A lot of times a real friction will start with "BUT..." A very handy format describing customer frictions contains three elements.

- A. Situation: Describes the personal characteristics and situation of the customer.
- B. Need: Describes the needs of the customer.
- C. Friction: Describes the problem or struggle of the customer.

Let me give you a concrete example of a friction in Northern Europe among women ages 30-50 with children:

- A. Situation: I am a housewife and mother of two children.
- B. Need: I would love to be more than the mother of..... or the wife of..... and would like to go back to work again.
- C. Friction: But I am afraid that I won't be able to combine a part-time job with my responsibilities at home. Besides that, temp agencies don't like to employ mothers.

Tip: The art of describing a good customer friction is to write it down in plain customer language and keep it as simple as possible.

1. Robert G. Cooper, Scott Edgett (March 2008). "Ideation for Product Innovation: What are the Best Methods?" PDMA Visions.